

Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on:

- the ‘Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the eEurope Benchmarking report’, and
- the ‘Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on eEurope 2005: An information society for all’

(2003/C 128/03)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

having regard to the European Commission Communication on the eEurope Benchmarking report (COM(2002) 62 final) and the European Commission Communication on eEurope 2005: An information society for all (COM(2002) 263 final);

having regard to the decisions of the European Commission of 6 February and 29 May 2002, to consult it on this subject, under the first paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community;

having regard to the decision of its Bureau of 6 February 2002 to instruct its Commission for Culture and Education to draw up an opinion on this subject;

having regard to its Opinion on the Commission Staff Working Paper on Information society and regional development — ERDF interventions 2000/2006: criteria for programme assessment (SEC(1999) 1217) (CdR 124/2000 fin) ⁽¹⁾;

having regard to its Opinion on Helping SMEs to ‘GO DIGITAL’ (COM(2001) 136 final) (CdR 198/2001 fin) ⁽²⁾;

having regard to its Opinion on The elearning Action Plan — Designing tomorrow’s education (COM(2001) 172 final) (CdR 212/2001 fin) ⁽³⁾;

having regard to its Opinion on Network and information security: proposal for a European policy approach (COM(2001) 298 final) (CdR 257/2001 fin) ⁽⁴⁾;

having regard to its Opinion on eEurope 2002: accessibility of public web sites and their content (COM(2001) 529 final) (CdR 397/2001 fin) ⁽⁵⁾;

having regard to its Opinion on the Follow-up to the Action Plan on promoting safer use of the Internet and the Proposal amending decision No 276/1999/EC adopting a Multiannual Community action plan on promoting safer use of the Internet by combating illegal and harmful content on global networks) (COM(2002) 152 final) (CdR 140/2002 fin) ⁽⁶⁾;

having regard to its draft opinion (CdR 136/2002 rev. 2) adopted on 28 November 2002 by its Commission for Culture and Education (rapporteur: Mr Jyrki Myllyvirta, Mayor of Mikkeli (FIN/EPP));

unanimously adopted the following opinion at its 48th plenary session of 12 and 13 February 2003 (meeting of 12 February):

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 22, 24.1.2001, p. 32.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 19, 22.1.2002, p. 14.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 19, 22.1.2002, p. 26.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 107, 3.5.2002, p. 89.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 278, 14.11.2002, p. 24.

⁽⁶⁾ OJ C 73, 26.3.2003, p. 34.

1. The Committee of the Regions' views and recommendations

Modern online public services

The Committee of the Regions

Benchmarking results and starting points for the Action Plan

The Committee of the Regions

1.1. continues to consider one of its key goals to be the creation of a socially and regionally equitable European information society and ensuring that it is accessible for all so as to prevent new forms of exclusion;

1.2. feels that basing the eEurope 2005 Action Plan on its predecessor, the eEurope 2002 Action Plan, and the results obtained from monitoring its progress will give EU policy continuity and thus further the development of the tools for its implementation;

1.3. agrees with the political conclusions drawn from the eEurope 2002 benchmarking exercise, but would, however, stress the importance for planning effective policy of recognising regional differences within Member States;

1.4. notes that the role and responsibility of local and regional government are crucial, not only in developing online public services but also in the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in lifelong learning (given that digital literacy is considered a new basic skill) and health care, in promoting information security, in developing online culture and tourism content services, in improving access to online services and, of course, in developing the interoperability of processes both within government and between organisations in general;

1.5. urges local and regional administrations in Europe to increase their involvement in the dissemination and further development of good practices, to exploit ICT potential to the full in their own activities and, in particular, to use all means at their disposal to foster the emergence of an equitable European information society covering all regions and serving all citizens;

1.6. highlights the need to support the planning of information society policy by introducing more in-depth, scenario-based analyses of developments in technology markets over the next few years;

1.7. considers that progress in candidate countries in recent years has been rapid and that, with enlargement, the challenges posed by the Action Plan will be similar for both current and future Member States.

1.8. points out the stated objective in the Action Plan of achieving the interoperability of all layers of government means greater transparency and will help to bring decision-making closer to citizens;

1.9. believes that it is not possible to develop online government services which satisfy the needs of citizens without broad cooperation covering all public and other services on a local and regional basis which is genuinely aimed at establishing one-stop shops for public services;

1.10. stresses that, besides enabling online services, ICT makes it possible to cut red tape in public administration, enhance the efficiency of government and customise services delivered through traditional platforms and notes that this does not receive enough attention in the Action Plan.

1.11. notes that online government services must be easy for users to find and offer users genuine added value. In addition, there is a need for research-based information on obstacles to the use of online government services;

1.12. considers that connecting government customer service points, health care units, cultural institutions and schools to broadband networks by 2005 as proposed in the Action Plan has made good progress in local and regional administrations according to the eEurope 2002 benchmarking results, but adds that further determined action will be needed at all levels to achieve this target;

1.13. proposes that adequate resources be allocated under EU programmes to the development of technologies that would make it easier for interactive public services already available on the Internet and services to be developed in the future to be delivered via digital TV and third-generation mobile communication networks;

1.14. requests that increasing citizens' opportunities to participate also be given prominence in the development of interactive public services;

1.15. notes that, along with national players, local and regional administrations bear a major responsibility for seeing that ICT opportunities are exploited in education and learning since a precondition for success here is close contacts with the target group, and in many countries education is an important part of local and regional government activity. Local, regional and national administrations must therefore bear some responsibility for ensuring safe Internet access for children and young people, to prevent their formative years being jeopardised;

1.16. points out that, in developing services that match people's needs, it is not normally appropriate to distinguish between the public and private sectors; rather both public and private services should be accessible via the same portals or other technical solutions, such as smart cards;

1.17. emphasises that, in addition to the important measures put forward by the Commission, there is a need to adapt the internal operations of businesses and public organisations to meet the challenges posed by lifelong learning;

1.18. believes that, in addition to IT skills, there is a need in both government and business, particularly in management, for more skills in tapping the potential of ICT;

1.19. considers that a better option than a separate European health insurance card would be to promote interoperability and reduce the total number of cards required by developing the functionality of European health insurance in such a way that it could easily be incorporated in existing smart cards;

1.20. welcomes plans to make health services available to citizens over the Internet. It is important in this context that the Commission concentrate in the first instance on supporting initiatives from the actual service providers in the field — which are mostly local and national — by means of exchange of experience, support, dissemination of best practice and benchmarking;

1.21. has misgivings about a common European system of patient identifiers, partly on security grounds, and feels that the necessary interoperability can also be achieved by making use of existing national regional and local solutions.

A dynamic e-business environment

The Committee of the Regions

1.22. hopes that the close relations that exist between local and regional authorities and SMEs in their regions will be exploited more than at present in European e-commerce development projects;

1.23. recommends that the Commission harmonise the procedures applied in e-commerce and online public services and the associated development work, particularly with regard to measures aimed at strengthening trust and confidence between parties.

A secure information infrastructure

The Committee of the Regions

1.24. notes that, owing to their wide range of administrative tasks, local and regional administrations have a key role to play not only in the application of good information security practices but also in their development and that a prerequisite for good security in online government services is the application of compatible methods at all levels of government;

1.25. would like to see an increase in the effectiveness of activities supporting the adoption of good security templates and, in particular, of security advisory and warning services needed by individuals, small businesses and government customer service points;

1.26. requests banking and other financial institutions to make credit cards and other electronic payment methods more secure, as citizens will not embrace e-commerce without a guaranteed high level of security;

1.27. points out that the importance of strong authentication in electronic transactions should not be exaggerated but that it should, for example, continue to be possible in the future to transact business by telephone without electronic signatures;

1.28. thinks that the Commission should invest more in technologies that make it possible to prevent the use of harmful content on the Internet, especially in computers which are used mainly by children and young people.

Broadband

The Committee of the Regions

1.29. agrees with the view put forward by the Commission in both Communications that market forces have not led to the provision of broadband technology to the extent that was hoped in all regions of Europe and is extremely concerned that this could become a serious obstacle to achieving targets as there appears to be no hope of providing broadband for many sparsely populated and peripheral regions of the Union;

1.30. notes that improving European competitiveness requires that all of Europe's knowledge potential be exploited, which can only be done if citizens, businesses and government have access to communications services that match their needs in all regions of Europe;

1.31. urges the Commission to deepen the analysis of policy options for broadband and the obstacles to its deployment, as promised in the Action Plan, since local and regional administrations, in addition to Member States, need this information for drawing up their own strategies;

1.32. feels that digital TV, in particular, can offer new groups of citizens an opportunity to actively exploit information networks;

1.33. underlines the fact that digital TV and third-generation mobile communications networks will not *per se* solve the problem of availability of interactive services because, in order to operate, these technologies need the same kind of investment in infrastructure as other technologies;

1.34. stresses that the MHP unified technical standard can make a major contribution towards the introduction and spreading of digital television in Europe;

1.35. proposes that the needs of wireless Internet access services be taken into account when deciding on use of frequencies and transmission strength so as to facilitate, in particular, the take-up of WLAN technology in sparsely populated areas and small population centres;

1.36. points out that the location of masts and other necessary investment in broadband infrastructure is best decided locally through negotiations between companies and public administration;

1.37. calls for realistic plans for ending analogue television broadcasting and requests that, in connection with the digital switchover, steps are taken to ensure the continuation of regional and local TV companies that are particularly important from the point of view of local culture and other local content;

1.38. underlines the responsibility of Member States for establishing a modern information network that covers all regions, for example by using special funding, imposing licensing conditions or laying down obligations for firms in a dominant market position;

1.39. calls for flexibility in the national and EU-level programmes to be drawn up on the basis of the Action Plan, especially as regards broadband, so that the programmes can be successfully integrated into regional and local development strategies.

Development, analysis and dissemination of good practices

The Committee of the Regions

1.40. proposes that the important role played by the local and regional level in implementing the objectives of the Action Plan and in building the European information society be recognised when organising conferences and seminars, as well as in connection with other measures to promote the dissemination of good practices;

1.41. hopes that the transparency of EU programmes will be increased and that procedures will be drawn up for disseminating information on positive experiences, regardless of the financial instruments used to implement the programmes;

1.42. notes that the good practical cooperation that already exists at local and regional level between Member States and candidate countries offers a means of promoting the operational objectives of the eEurope Action Plan and increasing exchange of experience;

1.43. points out that the proposal to translate good practices into templates based on, for example, open source software will foster the dissemination of these practices to the smallest organisations, in particular.

Benchmarking

The Committee of the Regions

1.44. believes that essential new information on developments in European competitiveness could be obtained, if monitoring of online services were broadened to measure the ability of public administrations to exploit ICT in modernising services and structures;

1.45. hopes that everything will be done to enable the candidate countries to participate in the implementation of eEurope before they become members and notes that, at a minimum, this means their inclusion in benchmarking;

1.46. notes that the new regional indicators proposed by the Commission offer an interesting possibility to compare progress in Europe's regions and will help to focus priorities in regional strategies.

A coordination mechanism for e-policies

The Committee of the Regions

1.47. referring to the central role of local and regional administrations in the implementation of the Action Plan, proposes that good knowledge of local and regional circumstances and needs be a factor in determining the composition of the future eEurope steering group;

1.48. considers it important that the expertise on local and regional needs and regional development strategies acquired

through the implementation of structural funds programmes be represented on the eEurope steering group.

Financing

The Committee of the Regions

1.49. proposes that a sufficient proportion of the financial resources available under the Action Plan be earmarked for the development of goods and services suitable for regions and municipalities where, because of location and the structure of the community, circumstances are exceptional, as these regions and municipalities have their own specific needs, and favourable developments in all parts of the EU are a prerequisite for achieving the general economic and social goals of the Action Plan.

Brussels, 12 February 2003.

*The President
of the Committee of the Regions*
Albert BORE